

Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican “Drug War”

An Anthropological Perspective

by
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Organized crime and drug-related violence are major threats to the Mexican state and civil society. An anthropological study of the narco-propaganda (orchestrated acts of violence, videos, graffiti, signs and banners, blogs, narcocorridos, and control of the mass media) wielded by Mexican drug “cartels” suggests that, rather than just a form of criminal behavior, it is the quasi-ideological expression of criminal organizations that, along with their police, military, and politician allies, control vast territories and have taken on many functions of the state. These organizations should therefore be treated analytically as political entities and their narco-propaganda as a powerful new form of political discourse.

El crimen organizado y la violencia causada por el tráfico de drogas constituyen grandes amenazas para la sociedad civil y el estado Mexicano. Un estudio antropológico de la narco-propaganda—que incluye actos de violencia premeditados con el fin de comunicar un mensaje particular, videos, graffiti, carteles y mantas, blogs, narcocorridos, y control de ciertos medios de comunicación—producida por los carteles Mexicanos sugiere que más allá de constituir una forma de comportamiento criminal, ellos son una expresión cuasi-ideológica de las organizaciones criminales que, junto a sus aliados dentro de la policía, el ejército y el gobierno, controlan vastos territorios tomando para sí muchas de las funciones tradicionalmente asociadas con el estado. Por lo tanto estas organizaciones delictivas deberían de ser tratadas analíticamente como entidades políticas y su narco-propaganda como una nueva y poderosa forma de discurso político.

Keywords: Drug trafficking, Cartels, Mexico, Border, Juárez

What is called society, with its law and order, is as frail, as precarious, as flesh and can be snuffed out and assimilated back into the desert as easily as a corpse can.

—Thomas Pynchon

Organized crime is a serious threat to the Mexican state and civil society (Garzón, 2008). Mexican drug cartels¹ expanded exponentially in the 20 years following the collapse of the major Colombian organizations that previously dominated Western Hemisphere cocaine trafficking. As the drug business boomed, drug traffickers became more visible in Mexican society, and bloody conflicts arose within and between drug cartels and between them and the state (Bailey and Taylor, 2009). In 2006, incoming Mexican President Felipe Calderón unleashed an aggressive new policy designed to combat this

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problem: a “war” on the largest drug cartels operating in the country (Grayson, 2009).² His military campaign challenged drug cartels on their own turf and caused even higher levels of violence (Campbell, 2009).³ The Mexican drug war became, in Misty Bastian’s words, “a war of terror against terror” (quoted in Strathern and Stewart, 2006: 32).⁴

Since Calderón sent tens of thousands of troops and federal police to fight the cartels, approximately 50,000 people have been murdered in drug-related and other forms of violence (Shirk, 2010). Kidnapping, extortion, carjacking, and other crimes spiraled out of control in Mexican states such as Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Nuevo León, Guerrero, Veracruz, and Durango. Drug-trafficking cartels expanded their repertoires to include all manner of criminal activity. The border city of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, is, by most accounts, the murder capital of the world (Vulliamy, 2010: 120).

Drug cartels and criminal gangs are often intertwined with corrupt police, soldiers, and politicians (Bowden, 2010; Ferreyra-Orozco, 2010). Organized crime is interconnected with elements of the state in a matrix that Nordstrom (2007) calls “il/legality” and Schneider and Schneider (2008: 367) “sponsored criminality.” Nonetheless, the largest Mexican criminal organizations (the Juárez Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel, the Pacífico Sur Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, the Zetas, the Tijuana Cartel, La Familia Michoacana [remnants of which are now called the Knights Templar], and the Díaz Parada organization) maintain relative autonomy from the state. Because of their diversity, size, and complexity, the cartels have generated a narco-counterculture, including their own saints (such as Jesús Malverde and La Santa Muerte) and rituals (Campbell, 2009).

“Narco-propaganda,” a distinctive form of communication and discourse, is a central element of the Mexican cartel culture. It emerged in the recent context of intra- and intercartel/governmental violence. It is similar to methods employed by Middle Eastern terror groups, influenced by paramilitary tactics used elsewhere (Turbiville, 2010), and utilizes new trends in cybercommunication (Campbell, 2012). This article will categorize the various forms of narco-propaganda in Mexico and critically analyze the phenomenon in light of contemporary Mexican politics and criminal issues.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CRIME AND CRIMINAL DISCOURSE

The anthropology of crime consists primarily of ground-level ethnographic studies of the practices of people and groups deemed “criminal” and analyses of criminalization processes (Garriott, 2011; Parnell and Kane, 2003; Penglase, 2007; Schneider and Schneider, 2008). A key element of the latter approach is the deconstruction of the criminalizing discourses and practices of the state. Such discourses generally stereotype and demonize the poor, ethnic minorities, and women. At the same time, state-generated laws and policies often disempower and marginalize populations deemed “at risk” of being criminal as well as those that are considered inherently criminal (Agamben, 1998; Foucault, 1979). Moreover, biased media coverage, moral panics, and social “common sense” tend to reinforce the criminalization of the powerless (Ryan, 1976).

Often left out of such research, however, are the systems of ideas actually generated by organized criminal groups (for exceptions, see Blok, 1974;

Schneider and Schneider, 2008: 357–366). Hence it is also necessary to analyze and deconstruct discourses produced by large criminal enterprises (Penglase, Parnell, and Kane, 2009; Schneider and Schneider, 2005). These discourses and the violent practices associated with them may be even more damaging to the poor than the unjust praxis of the state (and often may themselves be entangled with the state). This is especially the case in countries like Afghanistan, Colombia, Sudan, and Somalia, where nonstate and sometimes even criminal actors dominate considerable territory (Mulaj, 2009). Mexico is not a “failed state,” but criminal organizations—in collusion with corrupt government officials—control as much as 71 percent of the national territory according to an estimate by the Mexican government (*Proceso*, 2010b).⁵

Across the country, Mexican organized crime groups generate a political or quasi-political discourse in the form of narco-propaganda (Campbell, 2012). Narco-propaganda is not a fully formed political ideology, though groups such as La Familia Michoacana, the Gulf Cartel, the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, and the Zetas have doctrinal manuals or military-style training. It is, however, an important part of public discourse in contemporary Mexico. Furthermore, as the Mexican left has declined in recent years in tandem with the rise of the right-wing Partido de Acción Nacional (National Action Party—PAN), the cartel war and related narco-propaganda have largely filled the void in Mexican civil society previously occupied by dissident political movements and ideology. My point is not that the cartels or their propaganda are leftist but that, in the absence of effective, organized, and influential left-wing parties in much of Mexico, they are the main face of public opposition to the government today.

PROPAGANDA

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, propaganda is “the systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view.” All governments likely engage in propaganda, as do other political or quasi-political entities (Combs and Nimmo, 1993; Herman and Chomsky, 2002). Propaganda is used to threaten, confuse, inspire fear, and persuade (Cunningham, 2002; Jowett and O’Donnell, 2006; Rutherford, 2000). Ross (2002: 16–30), examining the philosophical basis of propaganda, has developed a three-part communication model in which propaganda is treated as a message delivered by a sender to a receiver. She proposes that propaganda is projected on behalf of sociopolitical groups or causes and is received by a socially important group of people. All propaganda messages, she argues, contain inherent epistemic defects.

Propaganda has been studied primarily as the expression of overtly political actors, whether they were totalitarian dictators, Soviet apparatchiks, demagogues in democratic societies, Islamist extremists, or leftist radicals (Bodleian Library, 2009). Yet propaganda in a broader sense emerges in contexts that are not normally considered political, such as corporate economics (Herman and Chomsky, 2002), and it may transcend the social/cultural milieu in which it originated and have direct consequences in the public political arena. Criminal groups may create propaganda discourses with inchoate political content in order to legitimate their actions vis-à-vis a society and a

polity. For this reason we need to broaden our concept of “propaganda” to encompass the actions of irregular, unorthodox, nonstate organizations that are often not explicitly political.

NARCO-PROPAGANDA IN MEXICO

According to Whitehead (2006: 231),

Terror and violence occupy central places in our contemporary cultural imaginary and we all die many times before our deaths as we contemplate and, even more crucially, anticipate the possible consequences of terrorist attack. This constant imaginative rehearsal of certain forms of death and dying reflects not just some greater awareness of the use of shocking and outrageous forms of violence as a means of political and cultural assertion, but also the avowedly conscious construction of violent strategies of such assertion.

Mexican organized crime groups are a response to the failures and neglect of the neoliberal Mexican state. They threaten the government even though in many respects they originate in the bowels of the Mexican state and thrive with the help of corrupt elements within that state (Astorga, 2005; Nuijten and Anders, 2007). This perspective can help us analyze the havoc wreaked on regions of Mexico by drug cartels, which have repeatedly confounded and manhandled the Calderón administration. Ultimately, however, the common people of Mexico are the main victims of narco-violence and have nowhere to turn for protection. The cartels, like rapacious Vikings, have descended on or emerged from cities such as Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez, Torreón, and Acapulco unmolested by local, state, and federal police and the military (or, often, in covert cooperation with them). These legal authorities have idly observed the mayhem, abused human rights, colluded with criminals, and partaken of the spoils of drug deals, extortion, kidnapping, and robbery or halfheartedly investigated the cartel groups that consistently outmaneuver or outgun them.

As the power of cartels has increased, they have been able to overpower state institutions in some areas. Thus, cartels have become the de facto political powers in broad swaths of Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Michoacán, Chihuahua, Durango, Sinaloa, and Guerrero. In some regions the cartels, in addition to controlling the production and distribution of illicit substances both locally and across the U.S. border, dominate the traffic in undocumented immigrants, prostitutes, counterfeit DVDs and music CDs and other pirated material, and even purloined Pemex gasoline, as well as extortion, carjacking, and kidnapping. Sometimes they even go “legitimate,” according to one journalist source (name withheld) in Coahuila, who observes that the Zetas run several large grocery stores.

The power of organized crime groups is so extensive that the main newspaper in Ciudad Juárez—the city most devastated by drug violence—published an editorial addressed to the heads of the cartels fighting to control the lucrative border city. The editorial (quoted in Guillermoprieto, 2010: 48) treats the cartels as the one true political force in Juárez:

We say to you that we are in the communications business, and not mind-readers. Therefore, as information workers, we want you to explain to us what

you want from us, what it is your aim that we should publish or refrain from publishing. . . . You are, at the moment, the *de facto* authorities in this city, because the legally constituted authorities in this city have been unable to do anything to prevent the continuing murder of our colleagues, despite our repeated demand. . . . We do not want more dead. We do not want more wounded nor further intimidations. It is impossible for us to fulfill our duty in these conditions. Therefore, tell us what you expect from us as a medium. . . .

As cartels have assumed economic and political power in specific territories they have begun to broadcast their quasi-ideological/political perspectives, recruit new members, and position themselves through various media including banners, newspapers, web sites, and YouTube. Thus the Mexican drug war is not only about extracting the profits of the narcotics trade but also about influencing or coercing public opinion. Womer and Bunker (2010: 86) even go so far as to argue that through social media "cartels advertise themselves as a culture, religion, and way of life." Narco-propaganda has multiple audiences that include rival cartels, opponents and allies within law enforcement, the military and the government, potentially disloyal cartel members, the general public, and even the U.S. government. Rival cartels respond to each other's narco-propaganda with their own, using the same means and media. Government officials often respond to narco-propaganda in kind with denials, rebuttals, or threats. The Mexican media report and comment on the latest appearances of narco-propaganda. In some cases, the cartels have forced television channels to broadcast their narco-videos. The Mexican public turns away in horror from expressions of narco-propaganda or is titillated by its lurid rebelliousness. Moreover, some youth, especially the so-called Ninis (for "ni estudian ni trabajan," neither working nor going to school), appear to respond positively to narco-messages and join cartels.⁶

Narco-propaganda is a multifaceted discourse with serious consequences for public order in Mexico. It is a form of psychological warfare and terrorism, designed to intimidate, dehumanize, and dominate. Because of its generally anonymous or questionable authorship, since there is seldom direct proof of who actually hangs signs with narco-messages or posts narco-videos in cyberspace, an aura of confusion and fear surrounds narco-propaganda, heightening its terrorizing effect. Furthermore, the shockingly unique and disturbing new forms of narco-violence/terror that ceaselessly emerge transform the Mexican cultural imagination both because of their immediate impact and because of their viral transmission on the Internet and through word-of-mouth and folklore. Finally, the spiraling conflict between various cartels, gangs, and police forces leads to a competitive escalation of increasingly extreme and creatively violent acts that are projected and reproduced again and again in cyberspace.

TYPES OF NARCO-PROPAGANDA

The main types of narco-propaganda are (1) spectacles of symbolic/orchestrated violence for public view, (2) narco-messages, written statements and signs with cartel-related content, (3) videos and cyber-postings, (4) narco-genres of music and lyrics, and (5) control and censorship of the mass media and information.

SPECTACLES

Nearly every day since 2006 Mexican cartels or their corrupt allies in law enforcement have tortured, kidnapped, and murdered their enemies, often in broad daylight in the most visible parts of cities and towns. Mexican drug gangs use classic paramilitary tactics such as assassinations, raids, and fire-fights (Turbiville, 2010). High-ranking politicians, policemen, lawyers, businesspeople, and other public figures have been murdered, as have rival drug smugglers, dealers, and hit men, as well as common people including the poorest of the poor. Among the victims are numerous women, elderly people, undocumented immigrants from Central America, small children, and even the handicapped.

Members of organized crime groups use grenades, 50-caliber machine guns, rocket launchers, and other high-impact weapons. They have detonated car bombs on the main streets of Mexican cities and attacked the Mexican Independence Day celebrations (in Morelia, Michoacán, in 2008). In addition to sensational public executions, drug cartel members have openly displayed their power through the kidnapping of thousands of people (most of whom have presumably also been murdered), arson, illegal roadblocks across streets and highways with trucks and buses, armed raids on prisons and police stations in order to “liberate” their henchmen, and other gaudy shows of destructive force. Penglase (2005) describes the use of such tactics, which he refers to as a “poetics of violence,” by Brazilian drug gangsters to create disorder and order and thus demonstrate their power vis-à-vis the state. This stylized violence also mimics the violent practices of the state itself (Parnell, 2003: 7). In both cases, the human body, maimed or destroyed, is the medium for terrorizing messages.

The victims of drug killings are deliberately dumped in open view. These acts of extraordinary calculated horror include creating piles of multiple decapitated individuals or cadavers with butchered limbs or other forms of dismemberment and/or sexual torture. Often the bodies or severed heads, singly and multiply, have been posed in a degraded choreography, such as to form the letter Z (a direct reference to the Zetas drug cartel). Severed heads or other amputated body parts have been displayed on top of cars, rolled onto a dance floor, lined up in rows, exhibited in public parks and plazas, secreted in ice chests, left in front of politicians’ homes or government offices, or impaled on poles and fences.⁷ Bodies have also been hung by ropes from bridges and buildings, burned with acid, crucified on barbed wire fences, decorated with masks (commonly that of a pig), written on or carved with knives, and disfigured or mocked in numerous other ways, such as flaying a face and stitching it to a soccer ball or dressing a body in the traditional garb of a stereotypical drunken peasant farmer. The appearance of murdered corpses or the deposition of bodies is often timed in order for them to be covered in specific time slots on local television news. In this sense, Mexican narco-violence constitutes a form of terrorism, aptly defined by Pettigrew (2006: 110) as “organized political crime.”

The desecration of bodies takes many other forms including inscribing bodies with identifying labels and threats. Specific amputations carry particular

meanings. For example, cutting off fingers implies that the dead person was a snitch (*dedo*, i.e., finger), cutting out the tongue implies that the person was an informant (*soplón*), cutting off hands signifies that the person stole money or a drug load, etc. Raped, sexually tortured and murdered women are often left in the streets with no clothing or with their undergarments pulled down (this is also done to men). The ritualized presentation or spectacle of dead bodies is such a common and patterned phenomenon that a whole vocabulary has emerged to describe the bodies: *enteipados* are bodies wrapped in duct tape (to suffocate the victims or prevent them from calling for help or knowing where they are going), *descuartizados* are bodies that have been quartered, *encajuelados* are bodies stored in the trunks of cars, *entambados* are bodies crammed in barrels, while *encobijados* are bodies wrapped in blankets (to stop blood seepage, to hide cadavers as they are being transported in cars, and for ease in carrying and throwing them).⁸

Horrendous brutality is frequently calculated for maximum propagandistic impact in struggles over territory, drug markets, and control of particular cartels. Yet, as Saviano (2007) has shown in an Italian context, organized criminal violence also “far exceeds any rational calculus, escalating into unbridled attacks on the kin, friends, mothers, and lovers of enemies, as well as bystanders” (Schneider and Schneider, 2010). The reporter John Burnett refers to this as a kind of “psychedelic violence” (personal communication, November 22, 2010). In either case, spectacles of violence combine coercion with aesthetics (Strathern and Stewart, 2006: 12). Thus narco-violence in Mexico is not just brutal and excessive but stylized.

Another form of narco-spectacle that is less overtly violent but also extremely intimidating is the procession of heavily armed drug traffickers in convoys of SUVs, Hummers, new trucks, and other large vehicles on city streets and highways. In some case, armed commandos of narcos have engaged in strategic maneuvers while wearing distinctive, unofficial (i.e., not of the Mexican military) uniforms and driving vehicles detailed with cartel insignia. Drugs and other contraband goods (such as pirated movies and music) also bear cartel labels or logos. Other narco-spectacles include public cockfights, horse races, and lavish fiestas and weddings, as well as attention-provoking appearances by prominent narcos in restaurants, plazas, and parties and other venues. A rich folklore, real and apocryphal, surrounds these spectacles.

NARCO-MESSAGES

Painted signs, manifestos, and graffiti are a ubiquitous part of the Mexican drug war. Thousands of narco-banners (*narco-mantas*) have appeared in Mexican cities and other public places, such as highway overpasses and bridges, since President Calderón sent the military to combat drug cartels on their own territory. These banners, some directed to the citizens of Mexico, contain criticism and direct threats to the president, the military, the various police forces, government officials, and journalists as well as insults, self-justifying explanations, and macho braggadocio. The president and other officials have been

denounced for supporting one cartel, usually the Chapo Guzmán organization, and “unfairly” fighting others or for accepting bribes and engaging in cruelty against specific organized crime groups or civilians (Hernández, 2010). The banners also demean and threaten the leaders and members of rival cartels while praising the cartel supposedly making the statement. A common rhetorical move in narco-messages is to claim that one’s particular cartel does not kill women, children, or innocent people as its rivals do or that it is made up of legitimate, local people and not outsiders. Additionally, these messages employ a masculinist rhetoric that glorifies particular drug capos such as Chapo Guzmán, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, and La Barbie.

On September 15, 2010, a spectacular banner appeared on a pedestrian bridge across the heavily traveled Avenida Tecnológico in Ciudad Juárez. The banner, attributed to Chapo Guzmán of the Sinaloa cartel, contained accusations that the Chihuahua state government, including the government, supported the Juárez Cartel, led by Vicente Carrillo Fuentes (*Proceso*, 2010a, my translation).⁹

To all citizens: through this medium I wish to clarify that I do not order the killing of children and women. I do not condone extortions or kidnapping. Those that are responsible for having the state totally destroyed are the members of La Linea [the enforcement branch of the Juárez Cartel] under the command of Vicente Carrillo Fuentes with the support of Governor Reyes Baeza and Attorney General Patricia González Martínez [*sic*]. The rules are clear: no children, no women, no innocent people, no extortion, no kidnapping. La Linea people kill for just 1,000 pesos in extortion payments.

A remarkably brazen narco-manta was hung from a pedestrian bridge in Nuevo Laredo in 2008. On it the (then united) Gulf Cartel/Zetas promised young men better wages and conditions to work for them rather than join the military (Garzón, 2008: 95, translation by Kathy Ogle):

Members and Ex-members of the Military, Los Zetas Wants You. We offer good wages, food, and benefits for your family. Don’t keep putting up with mistreatment and hunger. We are not going to give you Maruchán [instant] soup to eat. . . . We pay in dollars. We offer benefits, life insurance, and a house for your family and children. Quit living in the poor neighborhood and riding buses. You choose, the latest model car or pickup truck. What more do you want? Tamaulipas, Mexico, the United States, and the whole world are the territory of the Gulf Cartel.

Another omnipresent feature of the Mexican drug war is the cardboard or poster board sign left on or near dead bodies. In some cases, the narco-messages are actually written directly on cadavers with spray paint, indelible markers, or blood. In one instance in Juárez, two tortured bodies with plastic bags over their heads were found in a vacant lot often used as a narco-cemetery. On them was written “For selling heroin to children” and “For working for the Old Man.”

Perhaps the most common form of narco-message is the *narco-pinta*, a graffiti sprayed or hand-painted on a whitewashed brick or adobe wall or simply the side of a house or a commercial building. Typically, narco-pintas are scrawled longhand in black or red paint on a wall in the free-wheeling style

traditionally associated with the protest graffiti of leftist radicals. In contrast to the ideology-filled, grammatically correct graffiti of radical activists and guerrillas, however, they generally manifest execrable spelling and poor grammar and are loaded with slangy, vulgar epithets and death threats. They criticize the actions of (often nicknamed) members of one cartel and support those of another. They also frequently discuss who controls the drug plaza. Narco-pintas appear soon after a cartel-related murder and comment on its significance and recent events in the tit-for-tat violence of the cartel wars. A narco-pinta in Juárez in 2010, presumably from La Linea, proclaimed "God-damn, shitty Chapo [Guzmán], the war is not [about] killing our children, and you did just that and now we are going to kill your family. Sincerely, Diego [a leader of La Linea]."¹⁰ Another threatened that businesspeople who informed the Juárez police that they were being extorted by La Linea would be butchered.¹¹

VIDEOS AND CYBER-POSTINGS

The genre of narco expressions in cyberspace is now so vast and ever-expanding that it is hard to encompass in a brief article. Womer and Bunker (2010: 87), for example, discovered that MySpace is a venue with considerable (apparent) cartel presence, as is, to a lesser degree, Facebook. Cartel use of cyberspace is part of the growing appropriation of the Internet by nonstate opposition groups of various types (Howard, 2010). In the narco-videos, the drug-trafficking groups announce themselves as the new power, the emerging quasi-state body to be respected and feared. The three main dimensions of this activity are web sites, blogs, and YouTube video postings.

The most significant web site devoted to Mexican drug-trafficking news and activities is blogdelnarco.com, a site whose impact is comparable at a national level to the worldwide impact of WikiLeaks, though countless other Mexican narco-related sites also exist. Moreover, many news web sites concerned with northern Mexico and the border are so saturated with items about drug trafficking that they become primarily a place to learn what is new in the drug-trafficking world rather than about mainstream political or economic issues. The power of such web sites in Mexican public discourse is evidenced by the fact that they are frequently the victims of cyberattacks in the wake of revelations of politically sensitive information about the government or the narcos.

Blogdelnarco, begun in 2010, provided until recently a boundless supply of photos, videos (including a pirated version of *El Infierno* [*Hell*], a recent Mexican movie that stylizes the culture and lives of drug traffickers), blog entries, narco-related Internet links, and reports of cartel violence and general news of and about narco-traffickers. The primary staple of blogdelnarco is up-to-the-minute photographs and videos of gory massacres, severed heads, bloody limbs, and interrogation/torture sessions, which often culminate in an on-camera beheading. The lurid images and movies of horrific maiming are accompanied by editorial commentary by the operators of the web site and hundreds of comments by anonymous drug trafficker wannabees, gore video voyeurs, viewers concerned about the social decomposition of Mexico, some

“real” drug traffickers, and many young men who engage in macho posturing and morbid banter. Many of the photos and videos appear to have been made or posted by traffickers or policemen with exclusive access to crime scenes. In any case, narco-related web sites provide anonymity, few restrictions, and ample space for the dissemination of narco-propaganda.

The reputed sole founder of blogdelnarco describes him/herself as follows:¹²

[Someone] who is interested in how drug traffickers cleverly make a living (Killing, Kidnapping, Mutilating, Selling drugs, and so on), and take the lives of other people. His/her most important source of information is everyday people. My idea for creating Blog del Narco emerged when the mass media and the government tried to make it appear as if NOTHING BAD WAS HAPPENING, because of the fact the media has been threatened into silence and the Government apparently has been bought off. That is why we decided to create a medium of communication in which we could let people know what is really happening, present events exactly as they are, without making alterations or changes of our own.

Blog del Narco is not against or in favor of a particular criminal group, nor does it have the intention of offending society or making people uncomfortable. We just publish stories in a journalistic way.

The most striking video dimension of blogdelnarco—and what appears to attract the most viewers—is the interrogation/torture/murder of people captured by traffickers or their police allies. These videos are rough facsimiles of the ones made and posted by the Mexican federal police of their interrogation of criminals or presumed criminals. In the narco-videos, the captured, usually handcuffed prisoners are surrounded by men holding AK-47s or other high-powered rifles and are being interrogated by a loud, angry male voice off camera. As if in a perverted reality show, the terrorized prisoners, often displaying signs of beating and torture, provide self-incriminating answers about their drug-trafficking activities, murders they have committed, or other acts deemed negative by those who have captured them. They reveal information about the cartel they supposedly work for and divulge the names of policemen, politicians, and military officials supposedly on cartel payrolls.

In the narco-videos, the grotesque and obsessive torture applied to the prisoners prior to their execution has a specific dehumanizing function. As Buruma (2010: 44) points out, “The desire to degrade people before killing them . . . suggests that people have to overcome certain barriers before they can exterminate fellow human beings willingly. First they must destroy their victims’ dignity and reduce them to groveling wrecks no longer quite human.” Moreover, the narco-videos derive their power from the human tendency to identify the human body with the “body politic” (Whitehead, 2006: 236). Torture, disfigurement, and destruction of identifiable human bodies enmeshed in the Mexican drug war are experienced by the populace as both “bodily invasions” and the disintegration of society. “Control over bodies—both live and dead, imaginatively and physically—is a way of engendering political power” (237–238).

The prisoners are forced to make caustic comments about the drug capos and organizations with which they are associated. At the end of the videos, the captives may plead for mercy prior to being strangled, shot in the head, stabbed in the heart, or beheaded. No gory detail is omitted; the obsessive voyeurism of these videos is a kind of “pornography of violence” (Bourgois,

1995). The interrogation/torture video attracting the most attention in Mexico as this article was being written in late 2010 was one concerned with the forced confession of the kidnapped brother of the former attorney general of Chihuahua. One week after the video appeared on YouTube, more than 300,000 viewers had watched the attorney general's brother admit under coercion that he and his sister had colluded with the Juárez Cartel to allow them to traffic drugs all over the state and across the Texas border. The video also describes numerous killings committed by Juárez Cartel members, often supposedly at the behest of the former attorney general.

Blogs concerned with narco matters are connected to the videos and photos posted on blogdelnarco and other web sites or videos posted on YouTube. These blogs are dominated by commentators who claim to be connected to the narco world or knowledgeable about it and engage in taunting volleys of curses with other bloggers, often under the pretense that a particular blogger is associated with one cartel or another. The spelling, grammar, and punctuation are generally irregular and/or stylized, and the texts are riddled with calumnies, regional and drug slang, and other insider references. For example, in response to a photo concerned with the decapitation of a woman in Nuevo Laredo (supposedly) by the Zetas, numerous bloggers commented on the photo and its meaning and began attacking each other in terms such as these:¹³

Look, faggot, get your asshole straight, mother-fucker, we do not kill anyone who should not be killed, all of them have to die, you are the one who opened his big dick-sucking snout, you are the one that informed to the soldiers, faggot, and although you don't believe it, faggot, we also have connections with them [i.e., the military] and do you know what they are planning to do, faggot, in Tamaulipas and the country as a whole? Only the Tamaulipas Company Rules!

Sincerely, the Gulf Cartel

Important narco-related videos are also posted directly on the YouTube web site with richly allusive titles, *narcocorridos* as theme music, descriptive text, and/or lengthy blogs attached to them. One of the most famous of these, "El Quitapuercos de Chihuahua" (The Pig Killer of Chihuahua), appeared in 2008 near the beginning of the war between the Juárez Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel for control of the Juárez drug plaza. In the video, a narcocorrido band sings the praises of Chapo Guzmán, the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, who is said to be cleaning out the undesirable Juárez Cartel members. As the music blares, photographs of crime scenes, usually available only to policemen, are displayed on the screen, along with lists of crooked cops supposedly connected to the Juárez Cartel who were murdered by the Sinaloa Cartel or threatened with murder, photos of executed Juárez Cartel members, and attacks and fulminations against rival traffickers. One of the singers boasts that Chapo's people post information about drug killings minutes after they happen and encourages people to get their news from Chapo's YouTube videos and not from the official mass media.

NARCO-GENRES OF MUSIC AND LYRICS

Narcocorridos are anthems celebrating drug traffickers or chronicling events and the way of life of people in the narco-world. They were one of the first forms of narco-culture to become popular, especially with the advent of

Chalino Sánchez, a swaggering, charismatic crooner with an off-key voice (Quiñones, 2001). Sánchez dressed in the cowboy narco-look of the times and even engaged in a wild gunfight at one of his concerts. In 1992 he was assassinated after a concert in his home state of Sinaloa. Other important singers and groups who play narcocorridos include Los Tucanes de Tijuana, Los Tigres del Norte, and Valentín Elizalde (also murdered following a concert). Some bands, such as Los Canelos de Durango, associated with Chapo Guzmán, are viewed as “house bands” of particular cartels or as the quasi-official spokespersons of a particular cartel’s interests. As a result of these real or reputed loyalties, dozens of narcocorrido musicians have been murdered during the Mexican drug war.

Contemporary narcocorrido music ranges from simply danceable pop tunes with bad-boy motifs to songs that report on events in the drug war to songs that stoke the fires of violence and criminality (Cabañas, 2008; Edberg, 2004). The discussion that follows concerns music that glorifies torture, massacres, rampant materialism, and misogyny. Although narcocorridos do not deserve the blanket condemnation they have received from the Mexican government, it would also be naïve to romanticize them, given that they often extol the violence that is perpetrated and received especially by youth who are the main fans of the music.

One of the most popular narcocorrido singers is Gerardo Ortiz, whose recent YouTube video of the song “La última sombra” (The Last Shadow) presents a remarkable tableau of the youthful, consumer-obsessed narco-world. The video exalts the exploits of a young man who is tortured by the military but later rises to wealth and power in drug-trafficking circles after joining the Sinaloa Cartel and its leaders Ismael (“El Mayo”) Zambada and Chapo Guzmán. The video displays the strutting macho swagger of young males clutching high-caliber pistols and automatic weapons and decked out in the current narco high couture: Ed Hardy caps, shirts, and pants, Affliction T-shirts, and Hugo Boss menswear augmented and accessorized with Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses, gold crosses, expensive watches, and stylish cell phones.

“La última sombra,” illustrated by video images of drug deals, wads of American cash, confrontations with soldiers, torture, deadly shoot-outs, and bloody deaths as a backdrop, praises the talents of the rising drug boss and says that, in contrast to his rivals, he does not kill innocent people. This once-poor man from a humble village now owns a ranch in Italy and possesses the style and high-level criminal haughtiness of a Sicilian Mafioso. In northern Mexico he is now known as “the last shadow,” and his wrath is feared by his enemies: “They have nicknamed me ‘the last shadow’ because when I appear out of nowhere I rip my enemies apart.” The song concludes with a celebration of the new boss’s power to eliminate his hated rivals: “I apply death sentences. . . . I abhor my enemies.”

The greatest escalation of violent discourse in drug songs is found in a subgenre known as the Movimiento Alterado (the Disturbed Movement), which consists of “sick corridos.” For example, “Los sanguinarios del M1” (The Bloodthirsty Ones with the M1 Rifles) by Bukanas de Culiacán promotes drug violence in depraved, blood-curdling terms: “With AK-47 and bazooka at the neck, cutting heads off anyone who crosses us, we are bloodthirsty,

crazy and fucked up, we like to kill." Other groups that contribute to the Disturbed Movement genre include Komander, Los Buitres, and Los Buchones de Culiacán.

CONTROL AND CENSORSHIP OF THE MASS MEDIA AND INFORMATION

Since President Calderón initiated his "crackdown" on drug cartels in 2006, dozens of Mexican journalists covering cartel-related news have been murdered. Today Mexico has one of the worst records in the world for protection of journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2010). Not only have Mexican reporters been kidnapped and murdered but drug cartel members and other heavily armed men (who may or may not be associated with the Mexican military or law enforcement) have actually entered the editorial offices of major Mexican newspapers, especially in the northern states, and told editors and reporters which issues they could or could not write about. The penalty for violating their orders not to expose cartel members and to publish only innocuous stories is death. I learned this firsthand from the top Mexican reporters who cover drug issues at a conference of U.S. and Mexican journalists at a U.S. university in spring 2010. The journalists who reported the most fear—even to the point of questioning whether members of their newspaper staffs were on cartel payrolls and therefore a threat to them—were those from the largest Mexican border cities and states where the drug cartels rule.

Most Mexican newspapers, because of these threats and the murder of so many of their colleagues, no longer cover drug killings in any detail. Indeed, most news reports about these killings merely consist of the names and ages of the victims, how they were killed, the number of bullet wounds they received, where the bodies were found, and perhaps a brief mention of the number of people who killed them or the vehicles they drove and the caliber of the weapons they fired. Often the description of the killer is reduced to the formulaic phrase "an armed commando." Few killers are ever caught. In fact the rate of murders solved in Mexico is less than 2 percent (Eric Olson, senior associate. Woodrow Wilson Center, personal communication, October 27, 2010).

Cartels force television and radio stations to broadcast and newspapers to publish their version of events such as massacres, cartel-related government corruption, assassinations, and other crimes.¹⁴ In one celebrated case in the Torreón/Gómez Palacio area, a drug cartel kidnapped four television journalists, tortured them, and threatened to kill them if the television station they worked for did not play a crude narco-video defending the Sinaloa Cartel's version of recent violence instead of that of their archenemies, the Zetas. A similar illegal use of technology to broadcast narco-propaganda occurs when corrupt police agents or their cartel allies play narcocorridos partial to a particular cartel over police-band radio waves or simply shout terrorizing threats against policemen who oppose the cartel's interests on police radio frequencies. Additionally, the Mexican press's coverage of bloody cartel massacres, beheadings, and other forms of disfigurement—though perhaps not intentionally—promotes the cartels' self-image as overwhelmingly powerful, brutal, and terrifying. Overall, the impact of the suppression or expression of certain kinds of drug-related news is the silencing and political disarmament of the public.

CONCLUSIONS

As Strathern and Stewart (2006: 24) show, “violence flourishes in flux and feeds on many levels of conflict.” It is also nourished by the media and popular reports about criminal acts, narco-folklore (Campbell, 2005), rumors, conspiracy theories, political accusations, and realistic fears that characterize Mexico today. In this context of instability, narco-propaganda is part of a strategy of the drug cartels to capture large chunks of the Mexican state and society or to reinforce the criminal control of police forces, territories, and both licit and illicit businesses. It is also connected to the rise of “security”-oriented discourses and practices (Goldstein, 2010) in Mexico and President Calderón’s problematic war against the cartels.

Calderón’s war has led to military and federal police control of major Mexican cities and has actually increased violence and criminality rather than restoring law and order. These developments occur within a transition in the Mexican political economy from an illegal drug trade sponsored and enabled by a one-party state to full-blown, multifaceted, Mafia-like criminal groups with relative autonomy from the state and even some control of it. Narco-violence, terror, and propaganda are the “morbid symptoms” of this transition (Gramsci, 1971: 276).

Control of ideas, images, representations, discourses, symbols, and media are critical dimensions of narco-propaganda—the “intellectual” expression of contemporary drug-trafficking/multipurpose criminal organizations. The spread of narco-propaganda solidifies and is an expression of the new narco/criminal-dominated political economy in large segments of Mexico. Thus the examples of narco-propaganda presented above are political statements, not just criminal acts; they represent a form of political positioning in the chaotic shadows and corrupt labyrinths of the Mexican state. It is an unorthodox politics with serious consequences for the future of the Mexican state and society.

Narco-propaganda, through all of the means discussed above and the use of uniforms, insignia, and logos, creates a criminal “brand name” (Garzón, 2008: 167) that is effective at convincing the populace and the enemies of the cartels that they are formidable forces. It produces an immediate, intimate sense of danger and destruction—in Scarry’s (1985: 35) terms, “a fantastic illusion of power.” The result is a civil society that is dominated and demoralized. The frightened, disoriented Mexican citizens in cartel strongholds have nowhere to turn because they have no more faith in the police, the military, or the politicians than they do in the drug traffickers. Indeed, local people often comment when they hear news reports of drug violence in Juárez, “They [the government] are the ones.”¹⁵

Narco-propaganda is a kind of postmodern warfare (Gray, 1997) in which the cybermedia play a critical role. Control of information and the use of hyper-macho horror spectacles for media/public consumption serve key functions in this new form of conflict. Rather than merely a war between the government and the cartels, what Mexico is experiencing is both a war between nonstate armies with government connections and a war between those groups and the federal government run by President Calderón. Narco-propaganda is a primary means of keeping score in the battle.

Collectively, the types of terror and control/dissemination of information that I call narco-propaganda form a primitive discourse. The message of narco-propaganda is that the members of a particular cartel are the legitimate owners of the plaza and will exterminate anyone who gets in their way. Ultimately, this nihilistic/fascistic rhetoric is about control of territory and the profits of the drug trade and other types of crime. It is also, to a degree, the revenge of marginalized groups left out of, or impoverished by, the new regime of neoliberal globalization and free trade. The drug business and its multiple forms of violence and propaganda are a perverse form of empowerment for these groups, who express their disdain for a state that has ignored and oppressed them but in turn become forces of oppression.

NOTES

1. I use the term “cartel,” although it often exaggerates the extent to which drug-trafficking organizations are monolithic corporate monopolies (see Campbell, 2009: 19–22), because it is the term most commonly employed to refer to drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico, where these groups originated. Three other cautionary notes are as follows: (1) The lines between “cartels” and government (especially police) are blurred in such a way that references to cartels or drug-trafficking organizations include the police or other governmental figures who work with or for drug-trafficking groups. (2) Common criminality is rampant in cartel-controlled territories, and many murders, kidnappings, and other crimes attributed to cartel members may in fact have been committed by “ordinary” criminals. (3) Calderón’s war on the cartels has led to the division of organized crime groups and the emergence of multiple new ones.

2. In many respects, Calderón’s war on the cartels is overdetermined by the U.S. government’s political and economic dominance of Mexico, the U.S. demand for drugs, and U.S. sales of weapons that reach criminals in Mexico. However, that is not the focus of this article.

3. The danger of governmental overreaction to “apocalyptic crime talk” has been explained by Schneider and Schneider (2008: 366–367). As they point out, “the war on drugs is extraordinarily productive of what it is supposed to defeat, namely, criminal enterprise.”

4. This article is based on ethnographic research I have conducted, primarily in the El Paso/Juárez area, since 2004. In addition to field observations I have also done hundreds of interviews with direct participants in the drug-trafficking world (whether in law enforcement or trafficking groups) or those directly impacted by it. Since 2004 I have carefully monitored the local and Mexican national media as well as cyberspace for information about Mexican drug cartels. Among the primary media sources (newspapers and web sites) I have used to collect information about narco-propaganda are *El Diario de Juárez*, lapolaka.com, Norte, Proceso, *El Universal*, blogdelnarco.com, the *El Paso Times*, and YouTube. I have refrained from providing full citation information on all of the issues raised in this paper because it would be cumbersome and because the interested reader can easily access more data from news sources on the Internet.

5. It may be the case, as in mid-twentieth-century Peru (Nugent, 2010), that the Mexican government—in the absence of complete information—has exaggerated the threat of opposition groups. Only time will tell.

6. On why “late modern” youth increasingly turn to crime in times of neoliberal regimes and rampant consumerism, see Comaroff and Comaroff (2000: 306–309). In my review of narco-blogs I observed that the primary contributors to narco-oriented web sites were male. Additionally, the victims (and perpetrators) of narco-violence in Juárez appear to be preponderantly young and male, at least as this violence is reported in *El Diario de Juárez*, lapolaka.com, and other news media.

7. John Burnett, a top NPR correspondent who has reported on the drug war for many years, points out that “mere” beheading and dismemberment are no longer sufficient to shock a traumatized Mexican civil society. This helps explain the recent rash of dismemberments and “reassembling” of bodies in horrific ways to terrorize the desensitized public (personal communication, November 22, 2010). Among the most dramatic mass killings or body dumps in the drug war

occurred at a casino in Monterrey and in public places in Veracruz, Guadalajara, and Culiacán. Huge narco-cemeteries have been found in Guerrero, Tamaulipas, Durango, and other states.

8. Torture methods include the use of “acid, fire, electricity, water, suffocation, excrement, and animals” (Bunker, Campbell, and Bunker, 2010: 148). Moreover, some beheadings occur while the victim is still alive.

9. Several abbreviations in the banner were changed to the proper form for the sake of clarity, and punctuation was modified for clarity.

10. Originally published on September 9, 2010, at lapolaka.com (<http://lapolaka.com/2010/09/09/sicarios-pero-letrados>) (accessed September 9, 2010), my translation.

11. *El Diario* online, October 22, 2010, <http://www.diario.com.mx/notas.php?f=2010/10/2''2&id=a3ffe2b379871487460ffc272d7aea1a> (accessed October 22, 2010), my translation.

12. <http://www.blogdelnarco.com/p/acerca-de.html> (accessed October 29, 2011), my free translation.

13. <http://www.blogdelnarco.com/2010/10/decapitan-mujer-en-nuevo-laredo-tamps.html> (accessed October 29, 2010), my translation.

14. A more subtle use of the media by drug traffickers was the “concession” by the legendary drug baron “El Mayo” Zambada of an interview to Julio Scherer, the director of the important news magazine *Proceso*. It is common practice for traffickers to purchase newspaper space for the presentation of manifestos or other self-justifying statements much like those traditionally produced by Mexican politicians or political organizations (these are known as *desplegados*).

15. I have heard this expression used by Juarenses countless times to refer to crimes ostensibly committed by drug traffickers. In one case, an informant told me a firsthand account of the killing of a policeman supposedly by traffickers but in fact by other Juárez policemen. He concluded the story with the refrain “They are the ones.”

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